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GENERAL WILKINSON AND HIS
LATER INTRIGUES WITH
THE SPANIARDS

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GENERAL WILKINSON AND HIS LATER INTRIGUES WITH THE SPANIARDS¹

THE withdrawal of the Spanish garrison from Natchez in 1798 and the double territorial transfer at New Orleans in 1803 mark two conspicuous stages in the American advance to the Gulf of Mexico. As commander of our unpretentious army General James Wilkinson took an important part in both events. During the intervening years his routine dealings with the Spaniards apparently convinced both them and his superiors that he wished no friendship with them beyond the pale of national honor. Many of his contemporaries in New Orleans interpreted his attitude towards the French and his prominence in the formal transfer as a pledge of continued loyalty to the American government. The Spaniards had first surmised this loyalty six years before when he rejected their proffer to assist him in becoming "the Washington of the West".² Shortly after, they yielded the Natchez district to his troops and ceased attempts to pay the pension previously assigned him.

Yet in the midst of the turmoil and uncertainty that for a few months marked the American occupation of Louisiana vague rumor asserted that the general was renewing a dangerous intimacy with his former Spanish friends, and a sudden acquisition of newly-coined Mexican dollars apparently confirmed the charge.³ During the succeeding decade this report caused Wilkinson considerable annoyance, although his most persistent accuser, Daniel Clark, failed to present legal evidence to substantiate it.⁴ But the crafty Spaniards, who kept documents whenever they spent dollars, have preserved this evidence for us in the vast Archives of the Indies at Seville.⁵ Thus we may present additional testimony to the *Proofs*

¹ A paper read at the meeting of the American Historical Association, December 30, 1913.

² Manuel Gayoso de Lemos to the Prince of the Peace, June 5, 1798. Archivo General de Indias, Seville: Papeles de Cuba, legajo 178, no. 20.

³ Testimony of John McDonough in Clark, *Proofs of the Corruption of General James Wilkinson*, p. 27, and app. no. 24, p. 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 81 and 82.

⁵ The writer wishes to acknowledge the assistance, in unearthing this evidence, of Mr. Roscoe R. Hill, whose researches in the Cuban Papers, under the direction of the Department of Historical Research of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, have greatly facilitated his own work. He is likewise under

of the Corruption of General James Wilkinson, which the author of that famous diatribe was unable to secure.

In February, 1804, Don Vizente Folch, governor of West Florida, chanced to be in New Orleans and while there renewed with the general those reprehensible relations that he elsewhere calls "ancient History".⁶ As in his previous intrigues, Wilkinson took the initiative, after exacting from the other a pledge of secrecy. Thus fortified he began their first interview by making "various reflections" upon the course that Spain should pursue to prevent the United States from profiting at its expense by the cession of Louisiana. The conspicuous part that he had taken in this act apparently did not deter him from offering to aid its former owner. Folch may have thought that he was simply trying to play the double mercenary game that always characterized him, yet he seems to have found something valuable in his "Reflections". Upon the governor's suggestion, therefore, the other promised to write them out in detail. Folch was then to translate the work and send it to his immediate superior, Captain-General Someruelos of Cuba.

At the conclusion of the interview Wilkinson brought up a matter which he confessed was of considerable embarrassment to him. It shortly appeared that the embarrassment was of the chronic, financial kind that he frequently experienced, which in itself will explain his continual double-dealing. He stated, so Folch tells us, that some fifteen years before he had been promised an annual pension of two thousand dollars, but that for the past ten years he had received nothing. He was about to go north to Washington and suggested that Folch should pay him the sum due on his pension. His constant travelling expenses and other needs would make this very acceptable. In return he promised to furnish the text of his "Reflections", and in addition to ascertain the plans and purposes of Jefferson and the cabinet ministers and report thoroughly thereon. He would be able to do this for he knew "what was concealed in the heart of the President"—an insight of which few of his contemporaries dared boast. But Wilkinson was trying to impress the Spanish governor.

Folch did not have enough money on hand to meet the ordinary obligation to Sr. D. Pedro Torres Lanzas and Sr. D. José Gonzalez Verger, director and vice-director of the Archives of the Indies, and Sr. D. Ignacio Olavide, sub-director of the Archivo Historico Nacional, Madrid, for many courtesies.

⁶ The main source for this intrigue is the *reservado* no. 3 of Folch to Someruelos, dated April 10, 1804. This is in Papeles de Cuba, legajo 1574. Other references occur in Folch's *muy reservado* no. 130, January 26, 1809, in legajo 1566. Cf. notes 11 and 36. Mr. C. E. Chapman courteously supervised the copying of these documents.

expenses of his government, to say nothing of a demand like the present, even if it should be reduced by one-half, as Wilkinson speedily suggested. Nor could he refer the matter to the intendant, Morales, with whom neither he nor Wilkinson was on good terms. He suggested, therefore, that they should apply to the Marqués de Casa Calvo, who, as boundary commissioner, was then in New Orleans to settle the limits of Louisiana with the Americans. The marqués had recently received one hundred thousand dollars from Mexico, and from this he might readily and covertly furnish Wilkinson with a portion of his original demand.

The other demurred at this.

I am afraid [he said], and you ought to guess why. You know better than I that the marqués is entirely under the direction of his secretary; that the latter is not capable of keeping a secret, and he would hardly learn of my plan before communicating it unreservedly and in complete detail to his friend and comrade, the intendant. At present the latter is on very intimate terms with Mr. Daniel Clark, and they are likewise associated in land speculations. I also ought to tell you that Clark corresponds with Jefferson, who has asked the former to give him his views regarding the kind of government to be established in Louisiana. I am a lost man, if the secretary should learn of what I propose.

Folch tried to calm his fears by offering to speak to Casa Calvo in person. "I see that you do not know the marqués very well", replied the anxious general. "It seems to me that both he and his secretary look upon you as a very serious rival, and as we have no other recourse, I prefer to open up the subject myself with the marqués, and will do so next Sunday, using Mr. Gilbert Leonard⁷ as interpreter."

On the following Sunday evening, therefore, Wilkinson reported to Folch that he had broached the subject to the marqués. The latter told him that he could not keep the affair from his secretary, but that he would vouch for the latter's silence; nor could he give the whole twenty thousand dollars, but would pay such part as his limited resources permitted. Casa Calvo insisted that his secretary rather than Folch should translate the text of Wilkinson's "Reflections", but Wilkinson was obdurate upon this point. For the next twenty days, therefore, Wilkinson busied himself in preparing his copy which Folch translated quire by quire. At the same time he wrote to the Secretary of War that he was "collecting topographical information in all directions and at some expense which I am persuaded you will find highly interesting".⁸ So he was, but as usual he did not tell the whole story.

⁷ Leonard had served as *contador* under the Spanish régime in Louisiana. For his previous intimate relations with Wilkinson, cf. Wilkinson, *Memoirs of my own Times*, vol. II., app. XXIII.

⁸ Wilkinson to Dearborn, March 30, 1804. War Department, Letters Received.

When the double work of composing and translating the "Reflections" was done, Wilkinson carried a copy to the marqués. Later on the same day he urgently summoned Folch to an interview, in the course of which he explained that the marqués refused to allow any one but himself to appear in the correspondence, which he proposed to transmit directly to Spain. "For God's sake", the frightened Wilkinson begged, "help me out of the pool in which I am floundering." The terrified general was indeed in a predicament, for the jealousy of either Folch or Casa Calvo might lead to his undoing. Yet after Folch learned that Wilkinson preferred to omit everybody's name rather than his own, and that he had told Casa Calvo so, he agreed to patch up the affair so as to serve their individual purposes. The governor consented to the omission of his name from the copy that Wilkinson gave Casa Calvo. At the same time he was to inform the captain-general of the whole affair and ask him whether he or the marqués should continue the intrigue.

Wilkinson accompanied the memorial with an explanatory letter⁹ that seemed especially to arouse Casa Calvo's opposition. In this he stated that his course was inspired by his extreme interest in the prosperity of both countries. It is doubtful if such pretexts ever deceived the Spaniards who hoped to profit by his treachery. He certainly lacked a sense of humor or credited the Spaniard with lacking it, when he averred that while bound to the United States by the tie of birth, he was likewise united to the interests of Spain "by the most solemn obligations of gratitude". The cultured official whom he thus assured doubtless knew that such ought to be the case and also the exact financial outlay by which his country had gained this gratitude. He seems to have doubted its potency, however, when expressed through several channels, for he strenuously objected to the brief list of his fellow-officials whom Wilkinson thought it necessary to inform of his "humble though zealous agency". Even Wilkinson's old friend Gilbert Leonard might not act as intermediary, and at the same time, to avert suspicion, serve as vice-consul in New Orleans. As Casa Calvo "did not possess the English idiom", he must perforce use his secretary, Don Andrés Armesto, as interpreter. Wilkinson had previously told Folch that the secretary "could not keep a secret". Now he praised him to Casa Calvo for his "wisdom and probity".

Wilkinson thought that his previous persecutions on account of his partiality for the Spaniards and the danger to which he exposed life, fame, and position should relieve him from suspicion of sordid motives—"strangers to my bosom"—and recommend him to "His

⁹ A translation of this accompanies Folch's *reservado* no. 3, as "Number one".

Majesty's generosity". As indicating his view of this, he asked for the sum mentioned to Folch—twenty thousand dollars—and in addition an annual pension of four thousand dollars. He states that this is his present salary in the American service, but if so, he has in view not only his monthly stipend of \$225, but also his frequent allowances for excess rations and his padded expense accounts—both extremely vulnerable points of attack by his enemies.¹⁰

In his venality Wilkinson is not original enough to counteract the natural disgust excited by his greed. For example, in addition to his previous demands, he suggested that he might extend his own influence and secure adherents "to our interests and maxims", if he were given the privilege of exporting sixteen thousand barrels of flour annually to Havana. This suggestion recalls his monopoly in the golden days of the earlier "Spanish Conspiracy". He reiterated his hope that the balance due on his former pension might be promptly paid, for upon this depended the journey to Washington and his proposed plan of operations there. In closing he again begged the marqués, upon his loyalty, honor, and friendship, to avoid the use of his name but to use his now well-known designation—"Number Thirteen".

It may be well to characterize briefly the document¹¹ that seemed worth so great a price. Wilkinson began by referring to the growth of the population west of the Allegheny Mountains in the previous thirty years. A mere reference to this fact was at once sufficient to arouse the worst fears of the Spaniards. He then emphasized Louisiana as the outpost of Mexico and the danger both to Spain and the United States following its sale to the latter. He stated that the sole object of interest that his country had in the cession arose from the desire to obtain the navigation of the Mississippi, although the United States would have been obliged to oppose any attempt on the part of England or France to possess the country, had such arisen.

¹⁰ Steiner, *Life and Correspondence of James McHenry*, p. 550; *Annals*, 11 Cong., 2 sess., II. 2351.

¹¹ This will be referred to simply as Wilkinson's "Reflections". For a complete title cf. no. 4885 in Dr. James A. Robertson's *List of Documents in Spanish Archives relating to the History of the United States*. Dr. Robertson published this in *Louisiana under the Rule of Spain, France, and the United States 1785-1807*, II. 325-347, from a copy contained in the Mississippi State Department of Archives and History. This transcript, as Mr. Roscoe R. Hill informs me, is made from a triplicate one accompanying Folch's *reservado* no. 3. At present this does not accompany the letter and other documents in legajo 1574, but is in legajo 2355. As it is signed by Folch to attest its genuineness, Dr. Robertson naturally assigns its authorship to the Spanish governor and thus misses its real significance. But Folch's letter and other references clearly establish the general's authorship and afford additional evidence of his venality.

From the standpoint of Spain Wilkinson believed that that country should continue to control the Floridas and incidentally the Indians in the immediate vicinity. If Monroe should be successful in his projected mission¹² to gain those colonies, he trembled for the fatal consequences to both nations. If, however, Spain could secure the west bank of the Mississippi in exchange for the Floridas, all might be well. The population of the United States would not be tempted to scatter itself beyond the Mississippi, and thus Mexico and Peru would be safe from what he termed "an army of adventurers similar to the ancient Goths and Vandals".

Pending this exchange Wilkinson suggested that Spain should strongly fortify both the Texas and Florida frontiers. The Americans would hesitate to make any advance to the westward while the Spaniards held fortified posts in the rear. In this way they might force the United States to respect their territorial rights. In keeping with this policy they should arrest the exploring party under Captain Lewis and break up Boone's settlement on the Missouri, a dangerous outpost on the road to Santa Fé. At the same time Spain could well afford to be generous in this proposed exchange, even to the extent of offering to pay the current debt of the United States in addition to ceding the Floridas.

When one remembers that these suggestions were made by the commander-in-chief of the American army just after he had taken an important part in the very transfer under discussion, it is hard to find words correctly to characterize them. But the author is apparently as ready to betray Spain as the United States. While certain of his suggestions may seem due to an indirect desire to advance the interests of the latter country, it is probable that the chief motive is his own personal fortune. The only wonder is that after their previous experiences with Wilkinson, the Spaniards were again willing to trust him and to pay so handsomely for his obvious suggestions. After all these seem more despicable in purpose than dangerous in execution.

According to their agreement Wilkinson furnished Folch with a copy of his "Reflections" together with the accompanying letter. When the governor returned to Pensacola he promptly transmitted both to Someruelos, together with some comments of his own.¹³ He evidently had some faith in Wilkinson, but his own experience caused him to doubt that officer's accuracy. Folch insisted that Spain should not only recover the western bank of the Mississippi,

¹² This was Monroe's joint mission with Charles Pinckney, upon which he did not enter for some months.

¹³ These appear in an *informe* accompanying his *reservado* no. 3.

as the rampart of Mexico, but should also retain the Floridas as a protection for Cuba. Possibly they might cede some territory immediately bordering the eastern bank, if absolutely necessary to meet the American demands, but he rejects as "political heresy" any suggestion to pay the entire debt of the United States in order to secure the coveted Louisiana, although willing to repay the sum actually expended for it.

While the governor from Pensacola was thus discussing the memorial and uttering his own criticisms upon it, Casa Calvo paid Wilkinson twelve thousand dollars in lieu of the twenty at first demanded. The general invested the major portion of this payment in a cargo of sugar, which he carried with him on his trip to the north. This purchase caused several ugly rumors to become current in New Orleans which Wilkinson then attempted to explain by stating that the money was due on a former tobacco contract with the Spanish government.¹⁴ Later, in 1807, when Daniel Clark showed that this was untenable, the death of the military agent in New Orleans rendered another explanation possible. Wilkinson then asserted that he had received the sum invested in sugar as extra pay for his services in connection with Indian treaties.¹⁵ But at the time even the youthful Claiborne had his suspicions aroused, and, through a friend, applied to Daniel Clark to prove or disprove the rumors. Clark saw the books of the intendant, who was his friend, and who would have naturally paid out any money for the Spanish government, but, of course, he found no record of the twelve thousand dollars.¹⁶ For the time being, therefore, the general was safe with his ill-gotten gain.

During the next three years Wilkinson kept the Spaniards thoroughly interested in his movements but one is unable to note any real service that he rendered them. Following his usual double-dealing course he presented to Jefferson a twenty-two page memorial, describing the country between the Mississippi and the Rio Grande, accompanied by a series of twenty-eight manuscript maps.¹⁷ It is likely that this information caused the President to modify the instructions already issued to our envoys at Madrid and to direct them to insist more strongly on our western boundary claims.¹⁸ We may

¹⁴ Cf. notes 3 and 4; also Someruelos to Folch, July 12, 1804, and Minute dated at San Ildefonso, September 27, 1804. These latter documents accompany *reservado* no. 3.

¹⁵ Affidavit of James M. Bradford, Clark, *Proofs*, p. 27, and app. no. 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Wilkinson to Dearborn, July 13, 1804, and enclosure. War Department, Letters Received. The memorial is at present in the files of the War Department, but the maps do not accompany it.

¹⁸ *Am. State Papers, For. Rel.*, II. 627 *et seq.*

believe that the general's purpose was not only to gain favor with the administration but also to exert an indirect pressure on the Spanish authorities. If the American government emphasized its claims to the western country, the Spaniards would value more highly the advice in his "Reflections" and pay more handsomely for his influence.

Folch and Casa Calvo mention two letters that Wilkinson wrote them while in Washington. They were unable to decipher the first or to profit by the current gossip reported in the other. In the second the general closed with a characteristic appeal for more money. Casa Calvo was inclined to accommodate him but now lacked funds and for the present the home authorities had forbidden further payments.¹⁹ In the same letter Wilkinson urged Casa Calvo to follow the advice of his memorial. "Otherwise", he firmly declared, "all will be lost". However, Wilkinson had the opportunity to make double use of his data on the western frontier, by furnishing Casa Yrujo, the Spanish minister, with information regarding that section.²⁰ At the same time he tried to add to its value by interrogating the President's guest, the Baron von Humboldt, who had just visited Mexico.²¹ It is difficult to see who was to profit by this course of duplicity, unless it were the arch-schemer himself.

Another proceeding of Wilkinson at this time promised still less advantage for the Spaniards. He renewed an intimate acquaintance with Aaron Burr and their joint secret studies were directed towards western and especially Mexican cartography. This gave him an opportunity to employ still further his western data. When the two baneful intimates journeyed westward in the summer of 1805, Wilkinson gave the ex-vice-president enthusiastic letters of introduction to Casa Calvo and counselled the other to follow Burr's advice. In this way he tells him they will soon be able "to send to the Devil that idiotic boaster, W. C. C. Claiborne".²² Claiborne was then trying to rid New Orleans of Casa Calvo's presence, so this might seem an attempt to serve the Spaniard. But Wilkinson's efforts to get rid of Claiborne were rather inspired by a wish to put Burr in his place. As he himself was at the same time governor of Upper

¹⁹ Casa Calvo to the Prince of the Peace, February 28, 1805. Archivo General de Indias, Seville: Audiencia de Santo Domingo, Luisiana y La Florida, Años 1800-1837, est. 87, caj. 1, leg. 10.

²⁰ Casa Yrujo to Cevallos (no. 474), February 7, 1805. Adams Transcripts, Bureau of Rolls and Library, Department of State; Robertson, *List of Documents*, etc., no. 5021.

²¹ Jefferson Papers, series 2, vol. 85, no. 78.

²² Wilkinson to Casa Calvo, March 18, 1805, June 9, 1805. Enclosed in Casa Calvo to Don Pedro Cevallos, August 22, 1805, Audiencia de Santo Domingo, etc., est. 87, caj. 1, leg. 10.

Louisiana, the important frontier posts of New Orleans and St. Louis would thus be in the hands of the two most treacherous adventurers in American public life, with the bulk of the army at their back. Fortunately the administration distrusted such an untoward combination, although personal motives led Jefferson to continue its more pernicious member in the northern post.

Shortly after introducing Burr to Casa Calvo, Wilkinson found it necessary to send the Spaniard an apology for Burr's behavior while in New Orleans. The distinguished but distrusted visitor had neglected the Spaniard's proffered hospitality and had consorted with the group of avowed revolutionists known as "The Mexican Association".²³ Possibly this action too openly proclaimed future intentions to suit Wilkinson. Hence his apology. At the same time he referred to the critical relations existing between their respective countries, possibly to remind the marqués that another substantial payment on account would be acceptable. He hoped that all would yet be well, but if worst came to worst he suggested that, with Casa Calvo as his antagonist, they might do much to mitigate the horrors of war. If he meant to accomplish this by continuing his mercenary intrigues, we may be glad that other events intervened to keep from our military annals an incident that would have put Benedict Arnold to blush. Apparently this indefinite missive closes the intrigue as far as Casa Calvo is concerned, and in view of his curt dismissal he probably wondered what he had to show for his twelve thousand dollars.

During the next year Wilkinson in his dual capacity as commander of the army and governor of Upper Louisiana does still less to justify Spanish hopes. He seems determined to make his neighbors realize the danger in permitting the Americans to remain west of the Mississippi, for he intrigues with Burr, organizes a fur-trading company, initiates Pike's explorations, engages in land speculation with the Spanish faction among the Creoles, and arouses the opposition of all other local factions. This last effort led to his own transfer. He was ordered to repel the Spanish advance on the Texas frontier. After an inexplicable delay he reached the front, speedily took advantage of his new situation to arrange the Neutral Ground Agreement with his opponent, Herrera, and thus betrayed the filibustering project of his colleague, Burr. In this apparent service for the Spaniards, however, he immediately displayed his mercenary motives to a manifold degree, for he demanded more than a hundred and twenty thousand dollars from the Mexican viceroy. At the same time, to escape a storm of newspaper execration gath-

²³ Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, II. 283.

ering in Kentucky, he mystified Jefferson by dark hints of a plot to separate the western states from the Union, visited New Orleans with a farcical reign of terror, and speedily rendered himself the most distrusted and most detested individual in the lower Mississippi Valley. Fortunately for himself, in doing so he had gained renewed influence with Jefferson, for he had directed his efforts against Burr, the victim of the President's implacable hatred.²⁴

During these weeks of exaggerated terrorism, while our general's earlier relations with the Spaniards were being thoroughly ventilated in the *Western World*, a yellow sheet of Frankfort, Kentucky, his later intrigues also caused him considerable annoyance. At Natchez, in the very house in which his dying wife lay, he assured the Quaker surveyor, Isaac Briggs, on his honor as a soldier, that the payment made to him at New Orleans in the spring of 1804 was on account of a former tobacco contract with the Spanish government. He persuaded Briggs to believe him and to act as his special messenger to Jefferson in his feigned exposé of the Burr conspiracy.²⁵ At this very time he despatched another agent, Walter Burling, to Mexico City to make his pecuniary demand on the viceroy for breaking up this conspiracy.²⁶ The alleged plot may have been only the creation of his imagination, but its author had a very tangible object in view. His gambling instinct is shown in the fact that while trying to cover up a former bribe of twelve thousand dollars, he is planning to extort from the same source one ten times as large.

Despite his dependence upon executive influence Wilkinson does not hesitate in a private letter to refer to the President whom he has deceived, as "our fool". His reference is measurably just, though indecorous. In the same missive he calls Claiborne "that beast", and demands his removal forthwith.²⁷ But at the same time the general persuades the innocent governor that there was nothing criminal in his sugar transactions of 1804. By this means the youthful executive was led to acquiesce in the military chieftain's high-handed exercise of power. The public disclosures in the *Western World* and the hatred incurred by his recent course in New Orleans caused him once more to ask his friend Folch to get him out of difficulty.

Wilkinson had already given the Spanish executive minute though inaccurate information of Burr's movements and suggested

²⁴ McCaleb, *The Aaron Burr Conspiracy*, *passim*; Houck, *Missouri*, vols. II., III., *passim*.

²⁵ Wilkinson, *Memoirs*, vol. II., app. LIX.

²⁶ McCaleb, p. 264 *et seq.*; AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW, IX. 533.

²⁷ *Annals*, 11 Cong., 2 sess., II. 2359-2360.

that the other should secure Baton Rouge against the projected attack of the Kentucky insurgents. He even proposed that the Spaniard should combine forces with his own against their common foe.²⁸ In this his purpose may have been to further his pecuniary demands on the Mexican viceroy. At any rate, when requesting Folch to permit the American troops to pass by Mobile, he maintained that his measures were designed to protect not only the American territory and the Floridas, but the "Mexican dominions" as well. Influenced by this proposal Governor Folch, on his journey westward, planned to visit New Orleans, confer with Wilkinson and Claiborne on their common peril, and then proceed to Baton Rouge by way of the Mississippi.

Meanwhile the exaggerated report of Burr's advance had so excited the volatile population of the Creole capital that Governor Claiborne, ignorant of the general's necessity, refused to allow Folch and his officials to enter the city; and Wilkinson was constrained to support him in his refusal. The Spanish governor states that Wilkinson's aide urged him to disregard their apparent discourtesy and come on anyhow, promising that Claiborne would not oppose this move. Captain Daniel Hughes, the general's aide-de-camp, himself says that he tried to induce Folch to meet Claiborne and Wilkinson at the San Juan bridge, on the canal outside the city limits. The incensed Spaniard did not believe it in accordance with his dignity as "the Governor of a Province and an officer of His Catholic Majesty" to hold an interview within sight of New Orleans while he was denied permission to enter it, and proceeded immediately to Baton Rouge.²⁹ Thus the name of San Juan was reserved for later use in American military annals.

Although Folch refused to meet him at the bridge Wilkinson did not propose thus to be deprived of the other's valuable assistance. On January 25, 1807, he wrote him through mutual confidants that he was being slandered because of certain alleged Spanish intrigues of a criminal nature. He then asked Folch to state whether he had ever received a pension from the Spanish government, or had held any sort of commission under it. In his reply on the 10th of the following month, Folch acknowledged that he felt under obligation to clear Wilkinson's reputation, for as military officers they were members of a common scientific brotherhood. The Spaniard had

²⁸ Enclosures in Folch's *reservado* no. 58, December 13, 1806, Papeles de Cuba, legajo 1574; Folch to Someruelos, January 6, 1807, Archivo Historico Nacional, Madrid, Estado, legajo 5546.

²⁹ AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW, X. 832 *et seq.*, Folch to Someruelos, *reservado* no. 66, Papeles de Cuba, legajo 1574; War Department, Letters Received, 1807, Report of Daniel Hughes (to Wilkinson), January, 1807.

been in Louisiana since 1783 and had enjoyed confidential relations with his uncle, Governor Stephen Miró. So he was persuaded that if there were any evidence to incriminate Wilkinson, he would know of it. Then he solemnly "asserbrates", as Wilkinson puts it, that no such document exists in his records. The wording of this statement is significant, as we shall see later.

"If", the governor continued, "this statement does not convince those who believe the newspaper as they believe their bible", he advised Wilkinson to remember that he was a soldier and to find "a source of consolation in his unsullied conscience" and his recompense "in the esteem and regard of an enlightened and liberal public".³⁰ Unfortunately, however much Wilkinson might publicly parade his honor and conscience, they doubtless afforded him very little private satisfaction. Perhaps he had this in mind when he wrote to Secretary Dearborn that he had just received from Folch a "very indecorous note" to which he proposed to reply "in a style of contemptuous *insult*, which he may either carry to his grave, or get rid of when he pleases".³¹ Despite his bombastic note to the secretary—designed of course to conceal the real purpose of his correspondence with Folch—Wilkinson used this letter in his public defense published the same year. It is a wonder he dared do so after his letter to Dearborn, for the latter might compare dates and draw awkward inferences; but Wilkinson was accustomed to taking great risks, and may have reckoned on the secretary's support.

In addition to the unsatisfactory tone of Folch's letter Wilkinson found the temper of the Orleans legislative assembly a more pressing reason for a personal interview with the Spanish governor. In the definite protest taking shape in that body Claiborne also was involved, for he had acquiesced in the general's arbitrary course. Consequently both were ready to welcome Folch's intervention. The latter believed he could not afford the expense of a visit to the city, yet in the end he yielded to their importunities, aided by the efforts of mutual friends. He entered New Orleans April 23, 1807, and was received as if he had been the President himself.

On the following day Wilkinson sought his second notable interview with the Spaniard. He first complimented him on the way in which he had kept them in suspense in regard to his visit and then stated that his enemies had accused him of being a fellow-conspirator with Burr. In refutation he showed Folch certain papers to prove that he had been "faithful to the cause of his country and the true

³⁰ Clark, *Proofs*, etc., pp. 64-67, and app., pp. 13, 14.

³¹ Wilkinson to Dearborn, February 20, 1807. War Department, Letters Received, 1807.

interests of Spain". After a prolix examination Folch agreed that he had. The general then told him that a memorial was being prepared against Claiborne and himself in the legislative council of the territory on account of his arbitrary military rule, and he asked Folch to use his efforts to defeat it. This admission, after three years of occupation, that the Spaniard possessed more influence in the Orleans legislature than either Claiborne or himself, is not flattering to the American administration. But the necessity under which the general labored forbade any considerations of pride. Folch states that after considerable difficulty he obtained the suppression of the objectionable memorial and the adoption of one in favor of the two officials.³² We may believe that he did not render them this service simply to heap coals of fire on their heads, but to secure his own province from any possible hostile move on their part.

Shortly after this significant interview Wilkinson went northward to appear in connection with Burr's trial at Richmond. In this event he was supposed to figure as the chief witness for the prosecution, but in reality his public appearance merely added to the popular impression that he was the chief criminal at the bar. It was in connection with this trial that Wilkinson's course at New Orleans received a thorough ventilation. One result was the break in friendship between himself and Daniel Clark, an event which was to have momentous bearing upon his immediate future.

Clark was then serving in Congress as the delegate from the territory of Orleans. During the preceding winter and spring he had advised Wilkinson to modify his course at New Orleans. At this same time he had rendered Wilkinson a most effective service in making public his belief that Wilkinson received no money from the Spaniards in 1804. A letter from the general to Clark concerning this point shows that the former was almost capable of gratitude.³³ Why Clark later turned against his former friend and correspondent we have no direct means of knowing. He states that it was on account of Wilkinson's despotic course in New Orleans. Wilkinson says that it was because he told the truth about Clark's finances, but we have no means of knowing more definitely. At any rate, Clark did not testify as he had hoped to do in Richmond, but later part of his incriminating evidence against Wilkinson appeared in a Philadelphia newspaper. The scandal was then taken up in Congress by the turbulent and vindictive John Randolph. The ensuing discussion resulted in the appointment of a military court of

³² AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW, X. 832 *et seq.*

³³ *Report of the Committee appointed to inquire into the Conduct of General Wilkinson* (Ezekiel Bacon, chairman), pp. 121-128, 134-144, 161-165.

inquiry, and this caused Wilkinson once more to appeal to Folch for some testimony to be used in his behalf. His appeal is directly connected with another measure of national importance.

Jefferson's policy of embargo was then being put in operation. It affected West Florida with especial severity, for this region drew its provisions largely from the American territory to the north. The threat of impending scarcity brought Governor Folch to New Orleans in the spring of 1808. For a number of weeks he tried in vain to induce some of the New Orleans merchants to risk an evasion of the blockade in order to bring him fifteen hundred barrels of flour. After several attempts, as he later tells his superior, he accomplished his object through the clever management of Abner L. Duncan, a prominent lawyer of New Orleans. The governor did not explain in detail the cause of Duncan's interest, although he greatly appreciated it.³⁴ From another source we are able to make the explanation, and to connect his service with the Wilkinson inquiry then going on at Washington.

In February of 1808 Duncan and his partner, Gurley, requested Governor Claiborne to obtain from Folch the answers to certain questions concerning the previous career of Wilkinson. These questions were so worded as to disprove any connection on the general's part with the earlier Spanish conspiracy. Claiborne presented the matter to Folch who eagerly embraced "this opportunity to do justice to the said General out of a regard to honor and truth". Then with apparent directness, but really with skillful evasion, he answered the long list of questions in such a way as to convey the impression that Wilkinson's relations with former Spanish officials had been of a highly honorable nature and in no way detrimental to the United States. He repeated his former statement that there was in the archives under his control no document whatever to show that Wilkinson ever received a pension or salary from Spain.³⁵ His assertion did not then convince Clark and fellow-doubters and from other sources we may now clearly see why.

In a private letter to Wilkinson, dated a few months later, Folch thus expresses himself:

My dear friend: I believe that you are already well convinced that I have acted as is befitting a faithful servant of the noble Spanish Monarchy, and that I have sincerely fulfilled the obligations which friendship imposes upon me. I have done even more, for I have sent to the archives of Havana all that pertains to the ancient History, persuaded that before the United States are in a situation to conquer that

³⁴ Folch to Vidal (copy), February 26, 1808, and Vidal to Folch (copy), March 2, 1808, Papeles de Cuba, legajo 185.

³⁵ Bacon, *Report*, pp. 42-50.

capital you and I, Jefferson, Madison, with all the Secretaries of the different departments, and even the prophet Daniel himself will have made many days' journey into the other world.³⁶

Folch closed his public letter by saying that he had

on all occasions entertained the most favorable opinion of and sincere friendship for General Wilkinson; his qualities as an honest man and one faithful to his country entitled him to our particular attention and regard and we judged him to be worthy of the commission he holds. Should his conduct be in the light that is maliciously represented, we who were well acquainted with the treatment due that class of people would never hold him in our high esteem. Persons of that description are always, when their services are wanted, treated with apparent esteem but considered with the utmost contempt as destitute of all honor. Such services are always paid with money, but no means with regard or affection.

It may have been "regard and affection" that led Folch to pay this glowing tribute to his persecuted friend, but we are more inclined to believe that it was the prospect of obtaining fifteen hundred barrels of flour through the efforts of Wilkinson's lawyers. The basis of the bargain is readily discernible. Wilkinson gained the flattering testimonial; Folch obtained flour for starving Pensacola. It is true that in effecting this exchange, Wilkinson—or his attorneys—had to do violence to Jefferson's pet economic policy, the embargo. It is true that the Spaniards believed that the application of the embargo to West Florida was partly designed to force the relinquishment of that territory to the United States. To permit the shipment of flour to Pensacola would postpone this event upon which Jefferson had set his heart. In gaining his letter by this underhand means, therefore, Wilkinson was running counter to two cherished policies of his friend Jefferson.

Folch later flattered himself that his letter was largely responsible for the favorable verdict that the court of inquiry rendered in 1808. Possibly he feared that his fellow-officers would not relish his efforts in Wilkinson's behalf, in which they were perforce included, especially after that general assumed a dubious attitude in regard to the future of Spain. Writing in December to the captain-

³⁶ Translation no. 5 accompanying the *muy reservado* no. 130 of Folch to Someruelos, January 26, 1809, Papeles de Cuba legajo 1566. In foot-notes Folch states that by "ancient History" he means the charges brought against Wilkinson in the *Western World*. Wilkinson told Folch that he feared that the weak-kneed secretary, Andrés Armesto, might be induced to furnish his enemies with the copies or originals of incriminating documents. Folch promised to guard against this result, and after consulting with Casa Calvo, they concluded to send these documents to Havana together with others not of immediate use. The "Prophet Daniel" was Daniel Clark. Cf. note 6.

general, he attempted to clear himself from any suggestion of undue complicity in Wilkinson's flighty intrigues. He tells his superior that Wilkinson is the author of the "Reflections" submitted in 1804 and mentions that in the interim the American administration had greatly changed in its attitude toward him, so that Wilkinson in gratitude might now give Jefferson the same advice that he had formerly bestowed upon the Spaniards. He then continues:

I have said that he believes me his friend; I ought now to add that I have really conducted myself toward him as one who is in some respects a servant of my sovereign; for I have believed it appropriate to the dignity of the crown to protect a person who is persecuted for having revealed secrets and given information which interested him, as I have formerly communicated to you in detail; but my friendship does not and cannot exceed these limits, for the person of whom I speak lacks all qualities which might recommend him to my friendship, if considered as a private individual.³⁷

A few months after this correspondence there occurred in New Orleans the third and last of the series of interviews between Wilkinson and Folch which constitute the subject of this paper. In the meantime, a military court of inquiry had given Wilkinson a coat of whitewash. Public dissatisfaction with this result was heightened by the publication, early in 1809, of Daniel Clark's *Proofs of the Corruption of General James Wilkinson*. But secure in the support of Jefferson and continued in his station at the head of the army, Wilkinson was selected as the representative of the administration to usher in an era in American political history.

In 1808 Congress authorized the raising of additional regular troops and took measures to embody the militia of the various states. The critical condition of our relations with England and France justified this action. But the appointed place of rendezvous for these troops was New Orleans, and naturally the Spaniards regarded this as a hostile move against themselves. Accordingly Jefferson empowered Claiborne in New Orleans to explain to the neighboring Spanish authorities that the United States had no hostile designs against Spain in her hour of trial, and that the presence of these troops in New Orleans was simply to prevent any other nation from occupying territory to which the United States had a claim. Governor Claiborne dutifully made this representation to Folch at Baton Rouge and to Vidal, the Spanish vice-consul in New Orleans, without, however, materially abating their suspicions.³⁸

³⁷ Folch to Someruelos, *muy reservado*, no. 130.

³⁸ Vidal to Garibay, April 10, 1809, Archivo General y Publico de la Nacion, Mexico, Marina, 1809 á 1814, tomo I.; Claiborne to Smith, April 21, 1809, Claiborne Letters, Package, Bureau of Rolls and Library, Department of State; Parker, *Calendar of Papers in Washington Archives*, etc., no. 7567.

In addition Wilkinson, who was ordered to New Orleans to take command of the troops assembled there, was empowered to stop at Havana and Pensacola, while on his way, and make similar representations to Someruelos and to Folch. His journey to the mouth of the Mississippi, therefore, was marked by visits to those two places and accompanied by rumors that gave a sinister aspect to his mission. He was charged with petty graft in his expense account, with acting contrary to the embargo in carrying a small consignment of flour—an apparent necessity to him in his dealings with the Spaniards—and with making semi-diplomatic representations to the officials whom he visited. From evidence that may not now be given in detail³⁹ there was much to justify all these charges, and with reference to the last to prove it definitely.

In this journey and in his various interviews with the Spanish authorities Wilkinson appeared in a new rôle. While he was to explain the reason for assembling American troops in New Orleans, and to justify the embargo, his most important object seemed to be to sound the disposition of the Spaniards on the subject of independence and to suggest to them the possibility of an alliance to which Spanish America, Brazil, and the United States should be parties. In his correspondence with Folch during the past few months, Wilkinson had become less of a suppliant and had emphasized the possibility of such a union of the New World in case Bonaparte should conquer Spain, as seemed likely.⁴⁰ Whether Wilkinson originated this idea or whether it was exclusively Jefferson's is uncertain. If the former is true we must suggest a new influence contributing to the much-named doctrine associated with James Monroe; if the latter, the executive does not seem to display good judgment in selecting his agent. The Spaniards would hardly view such a policy with favor, when presented by their former discredited agent.

Yet in this incident it is likely that Jefferson was working with his usual finesse. He may have doubted Wilkinson's innocence, but evidently he felt obliged to befriend him. Possibly he felt that the general had been sufficiently frightened to pursue for the future a blameless line of conduct. What could render this more certain than to send him in person to announce his change of heart to his former friends? At any rate his employment on a remote field might allay for a time the storm of criticism that had become harassing to both. In this task Wilkinson might set on foot some new state policy that

³⁹ The writer plans to treat the mission of Wilkinson in a separate article to appear in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*.

⁴⁰ This correspondence accompanies Folch's *muy reservado* no. 130. Cf. note 36.

would serve to atone for his previous relations with the Spaniards and at the same time give welcome lustre to the concluding days of Jefferson's administration. The chance was worth the effort and will serve to explain the choice of Wilkinson, whether we view him as a repentant mercenary or an unexpected prophet of Spanish-American independence.

From either point of view Wilkinson's mission was absolutely without result. He reached Havana while the people there were engaged in a riotous demonstration against the French.⁴¹ This prevented him from opening up his mission fully with Someruelos, but Folch's letters to the captain-general had already insured the same outcome. He stopped at Pensacola but the governor was absent, so the general was unable to do more than land his controverted cargo of flour. On reaching New Orleans he found his new levies disorganized and suffering from disease. His dilatory efforts to improve the situation were absolutely futile, but served to bring him once more into unpleasant notoriety.⁴² At the same time Clark's book appeared and added to the public clamor against him. This led him once more to resume the rôle of suppliant, but he was now unable to secure from the neighboring Spanish officials the desired certificates of good moral character.

Nor was he more successful as a diplomat. As early as March, 1809, Governor Claiborne had reported that Mexico and Cuba had determined upon freedom, in case Spain succumbed to France. Two Spanish officials, evidently inspired by Folch, gave him this information.⁴³ In an interview at Baton Rouge, a month later, the Spanish governor personally gave him assurances of a like tenor and appeared ready to welcome American friendship and alliance. But when Claiborne, instructed by Jefferson, had earlier broached the subject to José Vidal, the vice-consul at New Orleans, that official emphasized the obligation that the Spanish colonies felt toward England. Likewise when Wilkinson arrived and secured interviews with Folch and with Vidal, who like the other was an old personal friend, they both insisted in including England in any proposed alliance. Neither of them, however, believed that Napoleon could conquer Spain, and if he did the Spanish colonies would be able to maintain their freedom against him and even bear assistance to the mother-country.⁴⁴ Folch, evidently inspired by Someruelos, pointedly told Wilkinson that it

⁴¹ Someruelos to Garibay, April 7, 1809. Archivo Historico Nacional, Estado, legajo 5543.

⁴² *Annals*, 11 Cong., 2 sess., II. 1606 *et seq.*

⁴³ Claiborne to Secretary of State, March 19, 1809. Parker, no. 7560.

⁴⁴ Claiborne to R. Smith, April 21, 1809. Parker, no. 7567.

was not fitting to divide the possessions of a parent before her decease.⁴⁵

Both Wilkinson and Claiborne report that Folch seemed ready to deliver the Floridas to the Americans in case of any change in political status.⁴⁶ This is significant in view of Folch's offer to deliver his province to the American authorities in the latter part of the following year,⁴⁷ which offer may be interpreted as an indirect result of Wilkinson's mission. In other ways that undertaking was a complete failure. The central administrative authorities at Havana and Mexico City, who were closely in touch with each other, were naturally alarmed by the concentration of American troops at New Orleans. The frontier officials in Texas and West Florida reflected this alarm and refused to give credence to Wilkinson's "pompous protestations" to the contrary.⁴⁸ Finally the latter, distrusted by his former Spanish friends, and pursued by vindictive enemies at New Orleans and elsewhere, was forced to resign his depleted command and once more journey northward in a futile endeavor to clear his reputation from the weighty charges of inefficiency and personal corruption.

ISAAC JOSLIN COX.

⁴⁵ Cf. Vidal to Garibay, April 29, 1809, Marina 1809 á 1814; Folch to Someruelos, no. 141, May 23, 1809, Robertson, no. 5170.

⁴⁶ Claiborne to Smith, April 21, 1809, Parker, no. 7567; Wilkinson to Monroe (1813?), Misc. Letters, 39, Bureau of Indexes and Archives, Department of State.

⁴⁷ *Am. State Papers, For. Rel.*, III, 398.

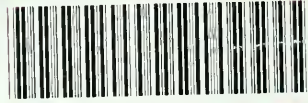
⁴⁸ Archivo Historico Nacional, Estado, legajos 5543, 5550; Archivo General, Mexico, Provincias Internas, vols. 200, 239.

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